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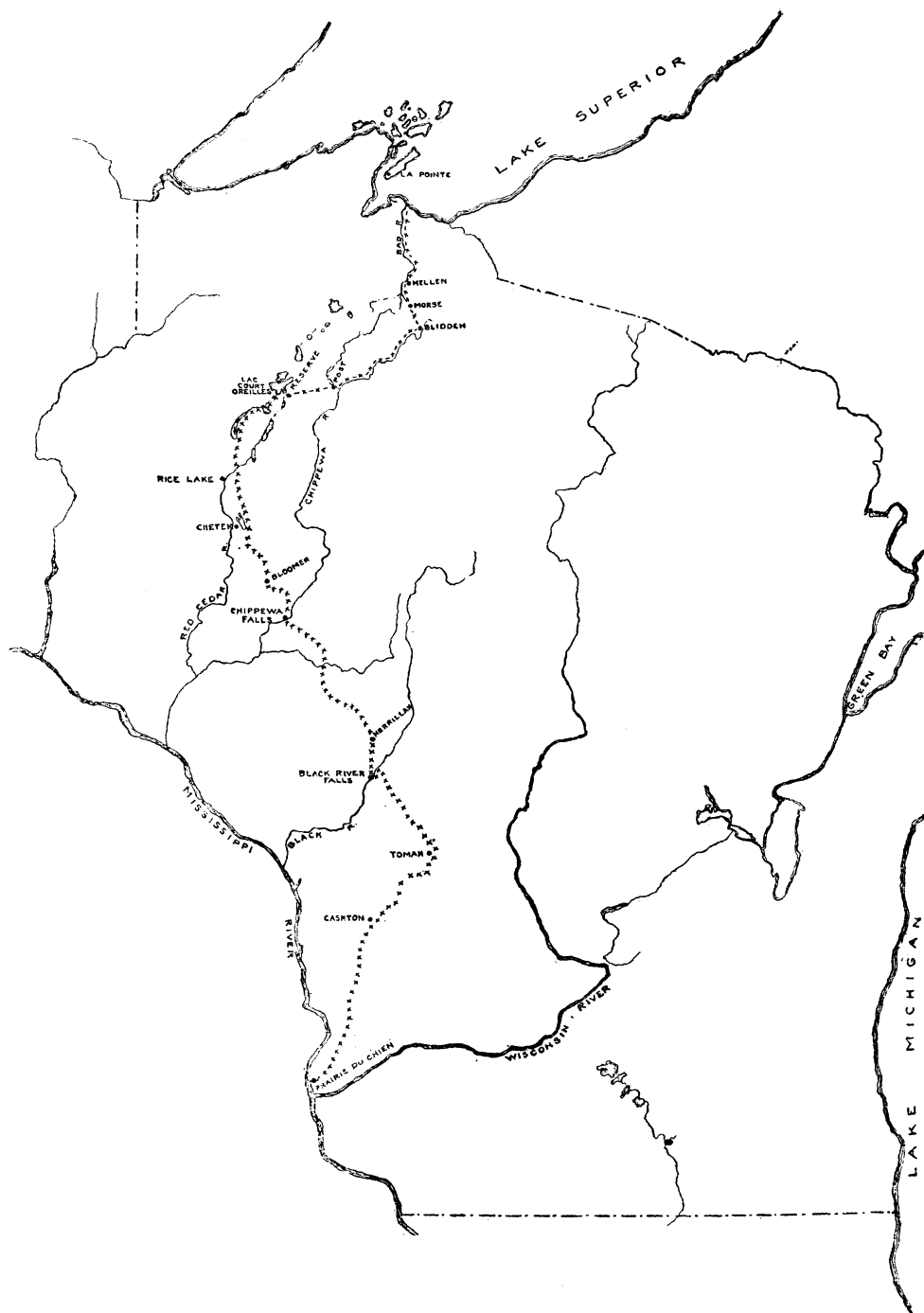
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A FORGOTTEN TRAIL

JAMES H. McMANUS

In the year 1842 the Reverend Alfred Brunson was appointed Sub-Indian Agent for the Bad River band of Chippewa Indians of Lake Superior, with a station at La Pointe on Madeline Island. Mr. Brunson at the time of his appointment was living at Prairie du Chien. The customary route of travel to his new station was by water up the Wisconsin River to the portage, across the portage into the Fox River, down that stream and Green Bay to Lake Michigan, down that lake to Sault Ste. Marie, then up Lake Superior to La Pointe. This was a long and hazardous journey. Some English miners in the southwestern part of the state, wishing to go to the copper mines on Lake Superior, on hearing of Mr. Brunson's appointment proposed to him that they join forces, secure the necessary teams, horses, oxen, and wagons, and make the trip overland. There was then no road above Prairie du Chien, but fur traders at that place assured Mr. Brunson that the trip could be made with no great hardship. On this advice the miners' proposition was accepted and the trip made. The trail made by this first wagon train from the southern part of the state to the shore of Lake Superior is the subject of this sketch. It is made in the hope that these suggestions may bring to light additional information concerning this route.

Mr. Brunson in his book, *Western Pioneers*, gives a brief sketch of this pathfinding journey; in this he mentions a few points where we can say the "trail was here"; but all the rest is conjecture. Mr. Brunson was intensely interested in the then new science of geology and its bearings on the then accepted tenets of the Christian religion. He considered it his duty to



THE FORGOTTEN TRAIL

Map prepared by Mary S. Foster of the State Historical Library

defend the orthodox faith against the statements of certain persons; he wrote this sketch of his journey rather to that end than to preserve a record of his own wonderful achievement in pioneering and trail blazing. Thus we find him using the natural objects seen on the way, such as rocks, soils, hills, and lakes, as illustrations and arguments in proof of the errors of his opponents, rather than as scenes for the pleasure, entertainment, and profit of his readers.

At the beginning of his sketch Mr. Brunson says, "We proceeded to the northern end of the prairie, then climbed the bluff to the height of land and kept on the ridge between the waters that flow into the Mississippi on the west, and those flowing into the Wisconsin on the east, to a point near the present site of the village of Tomah." I am not familiar with this section of the state¹ and can make no conjecture as to the location of this part of the trail. The next point Mr. Brunson mentions is a place on the Black River about five or six miles above the present city of Black River Falls; from this place the party moved down the river to the falls. Here it is quite certain that he and his comrades followed the line of the present highway or the lumberman's "tote road" which has been used from the earliest days to the present time. Mr. Brunson says that his party made a mistake in going so far up the Black River because they started east of this place at the point near Tomah, which was reached in making around the sources of the La Crosse River. Here then we must look for

¹ The old mail route from Prairie du Chien to Tomah and Black River Falls, called the Black River Falls road, went north out of Prairie du Chien on the old road marked on Lee's and Lyon's survey maps. At "farm lot No. 3" four and a half miles from the village, as marked on the maps, it reached Fisher's or Mill Coulee. Thence the road ran up that coulee onto a ridge where the present state road, route number nineteen, runs. It followed that route through Eastman, Seneca, Mount Sterling, Rising Sun (where the mail carriers changed horses) to Viroqua, estimated to be a distance of fifty-nine miles. From Viroqua the road is said to have gone about four miles east of Cashton, thence northeast to Tomah. This information is furnished us by the Reverend M. E. Fraser, pastor of the Methodist Episcopal Church at Prairie du Chien, who is much interested in our state history and gleaned the above facts from men who knew the early mail carriers.—Ed.

the trail on the high plateau which extends far to the north covered with scant jack pine and pin oak, patches of meadow with nutritious grasses fed by numerous clear creeks flowing from sources in cold spring marshes and surrounded by the ever present cliffs or bluffs—the remains of the ancient continent. Miss Ella, daughter of Mr. Brunson, in the *WISCONSIN MAGAZINE OF HISTORY* for December, 1918, says of her father that “in after years he rode in the passenger trains of the Milwaukee Railroad through the tunnel west of Camp Douglas under the trail he made in 1843.” I can hardly think that the party with its teams and wagons ascended this ridge, but rather that Mr. Brunson must have gone there for observation, which is a very reasonable conjecture. He may have used for that purpose many of these bluffs and ridges which are striking features of this plateau. We can with reason suppose that the party rested for a night at the foot of this bluff and in the morning took a course northeast to about the line of the Omaha Railroad and followed that line nearly north to the point where the old line swings west to cross the Black River just above the falls. At this point Brunson’s party must have held north on the line of what is known as the “cut-off,” or new line, leaving the falls to the west in order to reach the point five miles above. Upon reaching the falls the party found a company of Mormons operating a sawmill, getting out lumber for their colony at Nauvoo, Illinois. This was the white man’s outpost on the Black River at that time.

These Mormon lumbermen ferried the party across the river and requested Mr. Brunson to preach for them. That sermon was the first sermon ever preached by other than a Mormon elder in the Black River Valley. The course of the party from the falls probably lay to the northwest along the present line of railroad to the village of Merrilan. This is determined by the fact that to the west lay a line of cliffs and ridges that would have prevented swinging in that direction. On the other side, about ten miles above the falls, the river

emerges from what at that time was the southern border of the Wisconsin forest tract in which it has its source and through which it flows to the head of what is known as the Mormon Riffles, a two-mile reach of white water, confined within high walls of the oldest rocks, just below the present village of Hatfield, now the site of a great power plant. It must have been at this place that the Mormons cut their logs and floated them down to their mill at the falls; that act is commemorated and their sect perpetuated by the name given to this long stretch of swift water. The border of the forest continues west for about ten miles along the north side of a line of high bluffs to about the site of the present village of Merrilan. The men at the falls would have informed Brunson of this barrier due north; and he would have set his course for the pass at Merrilan where the line of bluffs from the east nearly meets the ridges from the south. This gap could be seen from a great distance and must have guided the party to the pass. At Merrilan the border of the forest turned sharply to the north and continued in that direction, deviating just enough from it to give grace and beauty to the contour far up the Chippewa River until, as we shall see, it swung to the west on the upper reaches of that stream and crossed the Red Cedar to join the western section of the north woods.

The ever present, impressive, and determining feature of the experiences of the travelers from the point at Merrilan must have been the forest, along the western border of which the trail must have lain. Every stream, large or small, came from the forest like a human life out of the vast unknown. A trail in the forest at this point would have been impossible for any wagon party at that time; while anywhere in the great sand plain to the west, with short detours around small groves of jack pine and pin oak, one could have traveled with ease, scarcely using an ax to clear the way. Thus the constant, unerring guide that directed the party to the course a little west of north was the forest. It still stands in its dense and

thrifty second growths, throwing a mantle of charity over the sin of man in destroying "the forest primeval" that Brunson's party beheld in its sublime beauty and glory.

From Merrillan the trail must have followed the line of the railroad to a point near Augusta or Fall Creek, where it held to the north to the crossing of the Eau Claire River, which is the next point mentioned by Mr. Brunson. This crossing was made by building a raft of logs for whatever the party wished to keep dry, then by swimming the cattle and horses and by dragging the wagons across. The site of this crossing must have been where the stream emerges from the forest some miles east of the present Eau Claire City, for Mr. Brunson says that later "from the high hills east of the Chippewa we saw the new barn of Mr. Warren, a fur trader, located at the falls of that stream," to which point they directed their course, crossing the Chippewa River on their way. Mr. Brunson mentions his surprise at finding in the home of Mr. Warren a fine library of the best books of the time.²

From the Warren post the course of the party would have been directed by Mr. Warren. His information would have included the fact that the line of the forest crossed the Chippewa River a few miles above and ran nearly due west, and that the angle where it turned again to the north was to be found to the northwest, near the present site of the village of Bloomer. The two striking features of the landscape through which this early party passed—forest and plain—still exist; and it is on the eastern side of the sand plain that we must look for the trail, for the forbidding forest crowds too far

² William Whipple Warren was the descendant of New Englanders who came over in the *Mayflower*. His mother was a French-Chippewa halfbreed, and he was born at the La Pointe village on Madeline Island. He was educated in New York under the care of his paternal grandfather and later became the historian of his mother's race. For a complete biographical sketch see *Minn. Hist. Colls.*, V, 9-20. The mention of a large private library in the wilderness brings to mind the fact that the Knapp family, who afterwards located in this vicinity, were great lovers of books and collected a notable library of good books.—Ed.

to the west to allow a direct line to the destination on Lake Superior.

The first point mentioned in the Brunson narrative north of the falls of the Chippewa is the pipestone quarry in Barron County. This claylike substance, soft when it is taken from its native beds, may be formed into any shape with a common knife, but on longer exposure to the air soon becomes hard and resistant. It is found at the east end of a large bluff or mound about six miles southeast of the city of Rice Lake. The present writer, though never at the quarry, has many times been past the place, which was about three miles from the old Chippewa Falls, Sumner, and Rice Lake road. The first time I saw the place was in the fall of 1879, the bluff looming high with rugged grandeur. But between the road and the bluff was that almost impenetrable, nameless something men called a "slashing." That expanse of desolation, the product of the so-called lumber barons, in other words the "Huns" of the north woods, extended about two miles beyond and all around the bluff. Beyond this, the forest in all its primitive majesty, beauty, and glory lay, just as Brunson and his party must have found its border at their feet when in 1843 they stood where I did in 1879. The place is just above one of the headsprings of the Pokegama Creek, at the angle where the line of the forest turns sharply to the west and continues in that direction across the Red Cedar River, cutting off the sand plain to the north and joining the lobe of the forest west of that stream, whose eastern border trends southwest to the Mississippi River in Pepin County and forms the western boundary of the sand plain.

A new problem now confronted the party. They were to leave the open plain and enter the forest; for in this latitude there is no break in the forest from the Michigan state line on the east to that of Minnesota on the west. At this point, however, the passage through the forest was scarcely more difficult than that over the plain. I have driven over the

ridges in that same forest with a horse and buggy, with only occasionally the use of an ax to clear the way. So, in that open forest, to the bluff and the pipestone quarry, a distance of three miles, the party could have passed in an hour. The rays of the sun were shut out even at noonday by the intertwining branches and the leaves overhead; while below, the ground was covered with a carpet of pine needles and dry brown leaves, accumulations of the long-past years.

While our party rests at the quarry we will retrace our steps to a point near the present village of Cartwright, in order to suggest that the Brunson party was following a more or less well-defined trail made by Indians, hunters, trappers, and fur traders, from any of whom information may have been received regarding the way. In fact the frequent recurrence of earthworks or tumuli found at intervals in all this region suggests that we are but tracing one of the most ancient highways of travel on this continent, Brunson and his party being but part of the great throng of the ages that had passed this way. In 1879 there were two roads from Cartwright leading to Rice Lake, then the white man's northern outpost in this region and his first station in the invasion of the forest from the south. One of these ran to the northwest, passing through the village of Chetek; the other ran north, keeping to the east of the large lake system north of Chetek village. These lakes lie in the form of a large letter U with the open end to the north and with their connecting waterways stretch across eighteen miles from point to point. This lake system has to be taken into account in locating the trail. Brunson seems to have taken the eastern trail, doubtless choosing it because he was already too far west for his destination. If he did not go this way it is hard to see how he could have reached the pipestone quarry, as by the other route he would have passed six miles west and some distance north of the quarry, at the head of the lakes. Another consideration is the fact that if he had gone the western route he would have been

pushed up to the outlet of Lake Chetek by a large swamp on the east side of the stream flowing out of the lake where the village is now located. Had Brunson been at this point he could not have failed to note the unusual number of mounds all along the southern and western sides of the lakes, those on the eastern side of the outlet forming a veritable city covering one hundred acres of ground, with almost regular streets. So it appeared when I saw it for the first time in 1879. The hands of vandals have swept the ancient city of mounds away, but the ground of the fields is covered with beautifully marked pieces of broken pottery, while many other relics of the past are still to be found. For these reasons we think that our party passed to the east of Lake Chetek, where the land is high and abounds in deep ravines which must have held the party too far away for them to have seen the lakes. However, at the old village of Sumner, six miles above the northern end of the lakes, the line of the forest would have pushed them out onto the high sand plain on the bank of Pokegama Creek; so that here we may say they stood and looked down on the beautiful lake and creek in the valley; though when we saw it the lake was much enlarged by reason of the dam at the mill. From here the trail must have run due north to the pipestone quarry.

From the quarry the course lay almost due north some ten miles to where Brunson says they crossed the Red Cedar River just below a chain of lakes. The first of these was Red Cedar Lake, out of which the river flows in a broad stream through a wide, picturesque valley covered with great pines seven to eight feet in diameter. Many of the largest of these stand on mounds, several of which are clustered around the outlet. These mounds may have escaped the notice of Brunson because of the dense forest covering them; or he may have crossed the river a little below the outlet where the present highway passes.

Lac Court Oreilles, the next point mentioned in the narrative, lies a little east of north from the outlet of Red Cedar Lake. It seems reasonable to think that the party was following the fur traders' trail, and if so, such a trail would follow the shortest line to the open sand plain north of the forest, a distance of about twenty-five miles due north. This route would bring the party to the lower end of Long Lake in Washburn County, along the southeastern bank of which it would then lie for some nine miles. Long Lake is in fact, or would be if no obstruction were in the west fork of the Red Cedar River where it flows out of the lower end of the lake, only a chain of small lakes, some of which are very deep and contain native whitefish. An old flood dam of the lumbermen still holds the water up to the level of the sluiceway floor, flooding all the marshes in the valley and making one continuous lake. Before the white man came with his dam, the beavers doubtless maintained a dam of equal height; so Brunson may have seen the lake beautiful. In going up the shore of the lake to the head, the party passed through the northern border of one of the most beautiful lake regions in Wisconsin. It covers about two townships of land. The lakes for the most part are small, but the land is a high sand and gravel plain. The water in the lakes is clear as crystal, and they have clean sandy beaches. The slopes of their high banks on the south and west sides are covered with a vigorous growth of birch, maple, oak, linden, and pine; the other sides have few trees but are covered with heavy growths of grasses down to the almost white sand and gravel shore line. Between the lakes, at the time of the visit of our party, dense groves of Norway pine were scattered over the plain. Although Long Lake now boasts a fine modern hotel and is a famous summer resort, few of the people who visit this region escape the lure of the charms of this wonderful playground. Here, too, must have been a hunter's paradise. Even today the traveler in the summer can see herds of deer in these plains

feeding in peace and security on the nutritious blue grass of the upland; in the autumn and winter the same herds are found in the borders of the forest browsing upon the tender bark of the young maples, lindens, and red cherries. Part-ridges were found in every copse; waterfowl covered all the lakes and streams. Fur bearing animals abounded, and beaver were found on every stream. On the highland today far away from any stream and in the valleys just below grass meadows are still found the remnants of their dams, showing that in the past there were living streams of water where fertile fields lie today.

From the head of Long Lake to Lac Court Oreilles the trail lay in a northeast direction over the sand plain with its lakes, streams, marshes, and groves of Norway pine. The narrative states that at Court Oreilles a messenger met the party, who urged Mr. Brunson to hasten to La Pointe with all speed, as officers from Washington were expected to arrive and would require his presence. So with two Indians in a canoe he took his way across lakes, through many narrow water courses, over portages, along creeks and rivers, until he reached the upper stretches of the Bad River near the site of the present village of Morse; then down that river through the Penokee Gap with its mad white waters on the rapids and madder, whiter, and wilder waters at the foot of its many falls, the scene approaching mountain grandeur with its broken crags and towering cliffs covered with wide-spreading hemlocks, pines, spruces, and balsams. As Brunson saw it, no destroyer's ax had been laid at the root of any tree of the primitive forest that stood in its grandeur on the tops of the cliffs and in all the valleys. No canoe could live in that madly rushing water, so the passage of the gap was made by portaging for some miles to a point at the foot of the high falls below the present city of Mellen, whence one might float on nearly smooth water to Lake Superior where the passage led up the lake to La Pointe.

The disappointing part of the narrative is that Mr. Brunson leaves the men of his party with their stock and wagons at Lac Court Oreilles. They must in time have reached Lake Superior, for at the outset of the narrative he says that "the wagons created great excitement among the Indians of the lake, they being the first ever to arrive among them." We can only conjecture the route over which they passed.⁸ On a geological map of Northern Wisconsin, published in 1872, is marked a state road running from Ashland near to the southwest corner of Ashland County. The other end of this road is not marked; but we know that it did run on to the southwest to Lac Court Oreilles and thence to St. Croix Falls.

Did Brunson's party pass on that route north from Lac Court Oreilles and mark the way? If they did, the trail lay on the high open ridges along the east side of the Namakagon River, around its sources, and to the south and west of the sources of the White River and Fish Creek, crossing the latter stream some miles above Chequamegon Bay. On many hunting and fishing trips I have tramped over these ridges and across these valleys in the open forest before the destroying ax had done its work and know how few obstructions would have been met. At one time on the ridges to the west of Fish Creek, to which stream I with a single companion was making my way, we came upon this old state road, then abandoned, with its ruts cut deep in the tenacious clay soil, exposing the roots of the trees. There was no sign of ax or saw where a way had been cut; but the track wound in and out among and around the stately trees. Here and there deep gashes were made in the sides of trees where the hubs of

⁸ From Henry Rush, Reserve, Wisconsin, we obtain (June, 1919) the information that the land route from Lac Court Oreilles to Chequamegon in the early period ran from Reserve eastward to the post on the Chippewa River; thence in a northwesterly direction to the site of the modern Glidden, in Ashland County; thence northerly to Mellen, and on in a general northerly direction to Chequamegon Bay.—Ed.

the wagons in passing had worn away the wood during many years.

As we followed the old trail I thought of all that had passed that way of merchandise, of tokens of exchange and measure of man's wealth, of high state officials and lowly folk, of stage coaches bearing messages of business, friendship, hatred, love, and sorrow; for this was once the only line of connection between the region of the Mississippi and the region of the lake. Here had passed age in its weakness, young manhood in its strength, and beauty in its charm; now all was unknown and forgotten. The road, finally leaving the ridge, swung to the right down a long, crooked, and narrow valley, crossing many times a stream of crystal-clear water, out into the wide valley of Fish Creek to the bank of that stream, down a steep pitch to the end of an old, nearly decayed bridge, the center supports of which with the center spans were gone, leaving one end of the land spans resting on the rude log supports, while the other ends rested in the water. Over this old bridge in the days of its strength had been carried through the eventful years of the past the white man's treasures and the red man's despairs.

I sat myself down on the bridge's crumbling supports upon its west side, and asked, Did Brunson's party pass this way? Were their wagons the first to break the silence of this ancient forest with the noise of modern commerce? Did they ford the stream here and pause to let the weary, patient oxen slake their thirst with draughts of the cool water and then pass on along the highland bordering the vast swamp at the head of the bay to the present site of the city of Ashland, thence to the high ground nearest to La Pointe? Was it this way they went? Or did they follow the fairly open way with its deep-cut valleys over the western shoulder of the Penokee hills, on the line of the Omaha Railroad to Ashland? Or did they go north to the foothills of the great northern divide and then east along its southern slopes, crossing the

Bad River just above where it enters the gap, and so on east to the line of the present highway over the ridge to the site of the city of Mellen, thence down the divide between the streams flowing into the Bad River on the east and those flowing into the White River on the west to the present Indian village of Odanah, where were the Indian fields of corn and vegetables in those old days? Who knows where lay the forgotten trail? Or do any care?